
Re-form-ation
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
October 30, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

Today, we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Isn't that fantastic? Isn't Reformation Sunday your favourite celebration in the entire church calendar? No? Really? Wow. I likely have the wrong sermon planned for today then. But perhaps I know what the problem is. Perhaps you think that the Reformation is something that happened 505 years ago. An event in 1517 that led to the Western church splitting from "The Church" into the Roman Catholic Church and about 45,000 Protestant denominations, including the United Church of Canada. Because I will agree with you if that is what the reformation is all about, perhaps it is a bit of a yawn to talk about today. Why should we care what happened 100's of years ago to people who are long dead?

Perhaps it depends a bit on how we spell the word reformation though. Consider these options:

[image: options below]

- Reformation
- Re-formation
- Reform-ation
- Re-form-ation

The first spelling does in fact refer to an event that happened 100's of years ago. What might "reform-ation" mean? I suppose (I mean, if it was a real word) it would mean the action of reforming something. And what might "re-form-ation" mean? Again, if such a word actually existed. The word would mean the action of forming something again. And surely, the act of forming something again is something we all do all the time. No dusty theology required here. We form again - in our society, in our families, and yes, even in the churches - all the time. Forming again is something we do all the time.

But do not worry. I know the rules. "Forming again" sounds a lot like change. And I know that nobody ever likes change. So I want to ease into this conversation. I will

follow the tradition of a great many preachers by taking the story back in time, just to give us some runway.

[image: brantford airport]

In this case we need a lot of runway before we take off - so we will be using runway 05/23. Because we need to talk about change, but we also need to talk about wealth. So I want to call us all the way back to the year 312 AD.

[image: what happened in 312 AD]

Why 312 AD you ask? What on earth happened in 312 AD? Two amazing things happened in the year 312 AD. In 312 AD a new religion sprang to life. And at about the same time, a fairly modern faith was pushed into the background. So in 312 AD, a new religion was formed, and an existing faith was largely relegated into a closet. And both the religion and the faith are called “Christianity”.

Christianity began simply enough, as a group of Jesus’s friends who hung out together. Over time they grew to become a very unpopular sect within Judaism. The movement continued to grow over time. Expanding geographically, theologically, and culturally. Early Christians were heavily persecuted as a group that did not fit anywhere, being rejected by both Jewish people and Romans. Early Christianity was not really a religious movement. It was a movement of faith. It was a community of faith. It was nowhere near powerful enough to be considered a religion in the early days of Christianity.

[image: constantine]

But in the year 312 AD, Constantine the Great converted to Christianity and established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. All of a sudden, Christianity was socially acceptable and started to really grow. Some people (including both historians today and people living in 312 AD) felt that Constantine adopted Christianity simply because it most closely resembled the Imperial cult (Sol Invictus).

[image: unconquered sun vs unconquered son]

Sol Invictus is latin for “unconquered sun”. Jesus was - of course - the unconquered son. As one critic put it, “Constantine's conversion was just another instrument of realpolitik in his hands meant to serve his political interest in keeping the

Empire united under his control: The prevailing spirit of Constantine's government was one of conservatorism. His conversion to and support of Christianity ... served an entirely conservative end, the preservation and continuation of the Empire.

— Hans Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*[7]¹

[image: christendom]

Even if historians are wrong about his motivation, Constantine certainly did favour a version of Christianity that supported the empire. The Christian religion grew out of that vision, and throughout history the Church has been very dominant in many societies. Medieval Europe, for example, has a long history of concentration of power into the hands of the state (via the royalty). And into the hands of the Church (through the pope and other Church officials). This marriage between the Church and state is part of an overall picture we call Christendom. In terms of numbers, Christianity has been popular, today making up approximately 1/3 of the global population. And because of that popularity, the Church is now one of the wealthiest institutions on the planet.

Since 312 AD, Christianity as a religion has flourished. But what about Christianity as a faith? How did the new Christian religion related to the Christian faith? Consider the basis of Christianity. The life and teachings of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus spent his life ... well, how did Jesus spend his life? If you are keen I invite you to select a gospel this week and read it through. And as you read the stories of Jesus, make a note of what Jesus actually does. Note what verbs are used to describe what Jesus did in his own ministry. What did he do? Where did he go? We are called to follow Jesus, so obviously we should have some idea of what Jesus did himself.

Spoiler alert: Jesus walked around small, poor, rural villages. He talked to whoever would talk to him. He talked to broken people, hurting people. People who had nothing except their own selves to share. Jesus listened deeply to people. He loved them. He helped them find their healing. Jesus gave people nothing - except his time, his compassion, his love. And instead of immortalizing or monetizing his successes, Jesus just moved on to the next village. Being the presence of God to whoever needed it. Near the end of his ministry there was a big confrontation with the religious authorities (who

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great_and_Christianity

today we might call the “religious right”) in Jerusalem. But the essence of Jesus’s ministry was sharing his life with the lost and the least - God’s children all.

The model for how we should live our lives - Jesus - was an unemployed homeless person who spent his time with a group of people who were dispossessed. Jesus died in poverty, without an indexed pension. If you want to see Jesus today, just head downtown and walk around. You will meet Jesus. Or join our drum circle that meets in Victoria Park on Tuesdays @ 1 pm. You will meet Jesus. In some form. And usually, Jesus can carry a beat.

[image: religion vs faith]

How do we make any sense of this contrast today? How do we connect Christianity as a religion, represented by the global Church - decidedly among the wealthiest of all global institutions - with Christianity as a faith that demands that we live within and amongst the poorest of all. Is Christianity about the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the few. Or is Christianity about being the presence of God to everyone we meet. And being called to go out and meet lots of people. Is wealth - particularly vast wealth - even compatible with Christian faith?

[image: no]

The author of 1 Timothy says, “no”. As we read earlier, “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith”. The parable in Luke is even more stark, leading to the famous statement - “You cannot serve God and wealth”.

[image: early church]

Does that seem a bit extreme to you? Surely faithful Christians are allowed to save for our retirement, if for no other reason that we do not become a burden to others. Why this harsh judgement against wealth? But first, it has become popular to blame the 1% for many of society’s evils.

But who is this 1%? I could not find a number for Brantford. In Toronto, to be in the 1% you need an annual income of about \$300k. For Canadians overall, you need

about \$500k to be in the 1%. I assume most of us are breathing a sigh of relief at this point. But I feel the need to remind us that if we consider the whole world (and why would we not do that), you can join the 1% club if your annual income is more than \$43k. Canadian. Is it just me, or did someone turn off the air conditioning - I'm starting to feel a bit more heat now.

So what's wrong with being in the 1% anyway? What real damage can they do? I'm glad you asked? One area where the 1% is doing massive damage is around climate change.

[image: wealth and climate change]

The 1% cause vastly more than their share of climate change. Essentially because they have the money to create lots of pollution and burn lots of fossil fuels. But more than that, wealthy people are protecting themselves from the impact of climate change while not providing that same protection to others.

[image: rolling stone]

According to the publisher Rolling Stone, "As cities around the world adapt to the harsh realities of climate change, the divide between the doomed and the saved is growing starker. In New York City, the first stage of a barrier designed to prevent flooding in lower Manhattan will break ground early next year. No such barrier is being seriously proposed for, say, Red Hook, a predominately African-American neighborhood that is equally at risk. In Miami Beach, streets are being elevated and LEED-certified condo towers are rising, but in low-income neighborhoods like Miami Shores, you have to walk through shit-filled water every time a big tide arrives."²

One UN human rights report put it this way: "The world is on course for 'climate apartheid,' where the rich buy their way out of the worst effects of global warming while the poor bear the brunt".

[image: system is not broken]

Not only do wealthy people have more options to relocate or purchase safeguards against the impacts of climate change. But recent studies show that wealthy people are

² <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-climate-apartheid-how-global-warming-affects-the-rich-and-poor-195444/>

causing most of the environmental problems in the first place. That is not because they are evil. It is simply because they can afford to purchase and pollute more. According to Oxfam: “Strikingly, our estimates of the scale of this inequality suggest that the poorest half of the global population - around 3.5 billion people - are responsible for only around 10% of total global emissions attributed to individual consumption, yet live overwhelmingly in the countries most vulnerable to climate change. The average footprint of the richest 1% of people globally could be 175 times that of the poorest 10%” This is clearly a humanitarian crisis in the making. The lasting solutions are far from obvious. And the most immediate, doable, possible solutions need to be done - voluntarily - by the people who are the least impacted by climate change.

Not only are the wealthy disproportionately responsible for climate change, but their justification for their own wealth is based on impoverishing others. This has been done for millennia of course, but more recently implemented in what has been called the “trickle-down” theory of economics. The theory - if you do not think about it very much - makes sense. Give public money to wealthy people and they will build companies and employ people.

[image: trickle-down theory - wine glasses]

[image: trick-down theory - and then what?]

But on reflection, giving public money to people who already have the most money seems undemocratic at best. William Blum summarized the trickle-down theory this way,

[image: table scraps quote]

“The principle that the poor, who must subsist on table scraps dropped by the rich, can best be served by giving the rich bigger meals.”

[image: trickle down Pope and Jesus]

I’m sorry, I did not want such a long rant about wealth. But it really does matter. The conversation about the 1% matters. It certainly matters to the 99%. And so I imagine that if Jesus was here today, that it would matter to him.

So what does this have to do with the reformation? I suppose it depends on what we want to re-form when we look around. Do we care about climate change? Do we care

about vast inequities? And when I say vast, I mean absolutely astronomical.

[image: go bus]

Do you know that our new GO buses have a capacity of 85 people. If we took the wealthiest 85 people in the world - we could fit them all on this bus. And collectively, those 85 people control the same amount of wealth as the poorest 1/2 of the population of this planet. There is nothing in the Christian religion that opposes that. Religion loves the power that comes with money. The wealthiest church on the planet is stilling on an asset of 6 billion \$. But for the Christian faith, that reality is completely unethical, unjust, and immoral. There are many things in our world that need to be reformed.

Now I realize that perhaps none of those 85 people are going to hear my words today. But as we celebrate Reformation Sunday it is at least good to remember that the Church - the Christian religion - has always endorsed and supposed vastly wealthy people. And so on Reformation Sunday, this is our annual call to action to lift up the Christian faith - and what it stands for. Perhaps it is time to bring the Christian faith out of the catacombs and into our streets - maybe into our churches.

[image: reformation day]

Personally, I love the idea of the reformation - however we spell it. But for me, the reformation is always about today. Until tomorrow. Because tomorrow the reformation will be about tomorrow ... which will be today.

The entire premise behind the reformation is that even an institution that we love - like the church - can be improved. Reformed. Refined. Made more relevant today. Made to work better today. And this is the sense in which I think about progressive Christianity too. My own lens on progressive is bringing a very rational lens to my faith in order to make it work better. That is what motivated me to write my book,

[image: evolving christianity]

“Evolving Christianity: Using scientific thinking to evolve Christianity to fight racism and other social diseases”. But for you, it might be rational, or it might be emotional, or spiritual, or more around social justice, or more about providing practical help to people in need, or more about just reaching out to lonely isolated people.

[image: clay]

Progressive simply says, we want to progress. We want to re-form and keep re-forming. And we are blessed to be in a world with so many problems. There are so many avenues where we might want to progress. Our world needs us. Our world may or may not need the Christian religion. But our world definitely needs the Christian faith.

This reformation Sunday, we are all invited to keep re-forming and re-creating. That is how we build the kin-dom of God in our midst.

Happy Reformation!

Amen.